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A PERILOUS BALANCE.

THE almost equal division of American citizens between two great political parties is often alluded to as a subject for congratulation. The superlatively wise independent, assuming that all decided convictions must be insincere, and all positive action mischievous, tells us in a philosophic tone that it is very fortunate when the opposition party in a legislative assembly is so strong as to be a constant check upon the majority. The optimistic statesman speaks complacently of the people as acting up to their honest convictions—half being convinced one way, and half the other, when the same facts and arguments have been laid before them all! To my mind, this equal division is at once our most serious disadvantage and our deepest disgrace. It proves either a disinclination to think, or a determination not to be honest. If there is no essential difference between the characters and policies of the two parties, if in every canvass there is an equal amount of right and wrong, honesty and dishonesty, wisdom and unwisdom, in their conduct and purposes, then we are all fools, expending our time, our money, and our temper to secure a triumph of Tweedledum over Tweedledee. But if in any canvass there is a right and a wrong side to the question at issue, about half of all the voters are either inexcusably ignorant or criminally dishonest. If with all our colleges, all our common schools, all our newspapers, all our periodicals, all our pulpits, all the free discussion that is carried on throughout the land, never more than a trifle over half of the voters can find out what is the wise and honest course to be pursued—and even they seem to find it out rather because their own party happens to be right in that particular canvass, than because they have applied the proper tests to the principles and facts under discussion—then of what use are all these educational institutions and processes? If the citizen cannot learn from them his first duty to the community, how

much is the state benefitted by schools, pulpits and presses? The young man that reads the papers only to learn the score of a baseball game or the exact minutes and seconds of a yacht race, and can master no more of the political history and condition of his country than is expressed in an ephemeral party cry, might as well not have learned his letters.

In a presidential election we cast millions of votes, and the popular majority is seldom more than one or two per cent. of the whole. In 1884, for example, in a vote of over ten millions, there was a plurality for the successful candidate of less than two-thirds of one per cent. It is nonsense to call such a vote the triumph of certain principles or the vindication of any policy. It was simply the shifting of a little ballast; and if the Republican instead of the Democratic candidate had been successful, it would only have been by the shifting of a little ballast to the other side. If a hundred honest men persist in dividing themselves into fifties, we must expect to see two or three knaves step in to determine the question at issue and secure the results. One of the practical effects of this state of things is seen over and over again in our legislatures, where a hundred days are spent in doing badly what ought to be done well in ten. When a great question gets into politics, it cannot be thrown out again by any one per cent. majorities. A minority that constitute forty-nine per cent. of the whole will forever resolve to try it again, hoping to shift the ballast and have better luck next time. Not only is no question ever settled permanently until it is settled right, but it must also be settled by a decisive majority, not a wavering fragment whom the next wind of political passion or sophistical discussion may swing to the other side. When serious questions are before the country, after they have been discussed constantly for five months and talked over at every fireside, the vote ought to show, not merely a bare majority for the right, but a majority of at least twenty to one. For example, Mr. Cleveland and his party came into power making certain charges against the opposing party and certain promises for themselves. If those charges have been sustained and those promises fulfilled, then we should this year elect Mr. Cleveland, or whatsoever other candidate his party may prefer to nominate, by a majority that will look like another era of good feeling. On the other hand, if the charges have not been sustained and the promises not fulfilled, we should sweep them out of power by a vote that will look like the day of judg-

ment. It is safe to say that there is not an intelligent man in the country who does not know or cannot find out which of these suppositions is true ; but it is also safe to say that we shall have neither an era of good feeling nor a day of judgment. It is always a pitiful thing to see a President who is the soul of honesty, and has administered his office for the benefit of the country alone, compelled to work up his own vindication by pulling the pot-house wires and resorting to every piece of trickery known to demagogues and charlatans, in order to secure renomination and re-election. His vindication is a task that belongs to all the honest men of the country, without regard to party. Of what use are fair-promising platforms and lofty letters of acceptance, unless we punish their violation and reward their fulfillment ? If our memories are not four years long, let us shorten the presidential term.

But the schoolmen tell us that the parties are founded on deep-seated antagonistic principles, and they discourse learnedly about the "strict-constructionists" and the "loose-constructionists," telling us how they strive to expand or compress the power of the Federal Constitution. Some of their readers and pupils believe them, and for years afterward go to the polls pondering whether they would better vote for strict construction or for loose construction. In practical politics there is no such thing. On the one hand, the party designated as strict-constructionist has never been known to hesitate, when itself in possession of the National Government, to stretch the powers of the Constitution as far as their elasticity would permit and the party needs required. On the other hand, the party designated as loose-constructionist has never succeeded in destroying any right, unless it was an alleged right to destroy the Constitution itself.

It seems to me that the remedy for the present state of affairs is to be found, not in less partisanship, but in a more honest and better informed partisanship. We impress upon our young men such maxims as "in union there is strength," but we forget to teach them that in union without intelligence there is mischief. There should be a complete reform in our methods of conducting a political canvass. In a country that contains Bunker Hill and Gettysburg, with a generation that reveres Washington and remembers Lincoln, there ought to be manliness enough to put away the clap-trap of brass bands and fireworks, to recoil from the infamy of campaign falsehoods, and to settle a perfectly plain

question on its perfectly plain merits. Any other course simply belongs to that smartness which is not wisdom. We should have less jingle and better journalism. Political managers tell us that the brass band and the sky-rocket have their effect and are necessary to secure a certain class of votes; to which the proper answer is, that it would be better to let such votes go where they will, and expend the effort in winning votes that carry with them the power of intelligence and the weight of character. Any fool can buy a sky-rocket, and put a match to it; but sky-rocket votes have never determined a question so that it remained settled. The first century of our national history furnishes some remarkable examples of sky-rocket votes, and teaches their insignificance.

In this day of newspapers, we ought to be able to look to journalism for the correction of public abuses and the enlightenment of ballot-casters. But the same argument that I have brought against the one per cent. majorities holds good also against the great engine that should change them. When a new political journal enters the field it is generally not because the man behind it feels himself intrusted with a mission to expound and circulate important truths, but because its proprietor has calculated that that community contains enough people of his party to support a paper that will keep telling them what they already believe. In the determination to uphold their own side at all hazards, by every means, and under all circumstances, a large part of our public press has sunk to the moral level of a Tombs lawyer. And for this, not so much the editors as the readers are to be blamed. So long as a political journal is read mainly or wholly by people of its own politics, who applaud it as a champion without regard to its truthfulness, so long it is likely to be reckless. Criticisms and exposures from the other side do not hurt it. The remedy might be found in an application of the ancient motto—To each, his own. A mendacious journalist should be even surer of rebuke from his friends than from his opponents. But who ever heard of a Republican rebuking a Republican paper for lying to help the Republican party? Who ever heard of a Democrat rebuking a Democratic paper for lying to help the Democratic party? Who ever heard of a Mugwump rebuking a Mugwump paper for lying on all sides? Unfortunately, it is not always the direct and demonstrable falsehood that is indulged in, but the cunning of misrepresentation acquired by long practice. “A lie that is half the

truth," says the poet, "is ever the blackest of lies," and an instructive chapter might be written on the Jesuitry of journalism.

I am not unmindful of the fact that there is some noble and sincere journalism in our country, and many of our brightest minds have devoted themselves to it. But it is an awful satire on our civilization to find on one page of a widely circulated paper the utmost pains taken to give us the odd half second of a horse race and the exact calibre of the revolver used by some poor suicide, while on another page equal pains are taken to obscure the real bearings of a question that may be of the utmost importance to sixty million people. We can hardly look for betterment in a non-partisan press. It sounds high-toned and philosophical to talk of independent journalism; but has independent journalism ever accomplished anything except occasional mischief? Horace's celebrated maxim about the safety of middle courses, has for nineteen centuries furnished excuses to the intellectually indolent, the time-server, and the moral coward, and has wrought incalculable harm. When the ship is in a storm, a persistent refusal either to port or to starboard the helm simply leaves her wallowing in the trough of the sea. And our political ship is always in a storm.

Once on a time, when a father asked for advice about sending his boy to college, he was answered, "Send him to any good college, except one controlled by your own religious denomination; do not send him there under any circumstances." Similar advice, if it could be followed, might benefit the citizen as to his political duties. If every voter would subscribe for and read not only a paper whose politics were consonant with his own but also one of opposite views, the standard of journalism would immediately rise, and with it the standard of political morality. In the mean while, I should like to see trial made of what looks to me like a promising experiment. Let us have a metropolitan journal in which all the important news shall be given accurately and concisely, and the unimportant excluded. Let a line be drawn down through the middle of the editorial page, and half of that page placed under the supervision of an able and sincere Democratic editor, and the other half under the supervision of an equally able and sincere Republican editor. With equal ability and enforced honesty, both sides addressing the same audience, the results would necessarily be determined by the weight of truth.

So long as the respectable men of the country allow themselves to be divided into two equal parties, so long policies will be determined and spoils gathered by bosses, floating characters, and such cranks as choose to band themselves into little make-weight parties that constitute balances of power. The occupations of all such ought to be swept away by majorities of twenty to one, majorities so flexible that they can be cast one way at one election and the opposite way at the next. Aside from all moral questions, the present method of conducting a canvass, with its excitements and its uncertainties, lays an enormous tax upon the people, and it is time it were abolished. If we keep on in this way, we shall arrive sooner or later at a crisis in which a vital question will be at issue, and the minority unwilling to submit. If that minority is almost equal to the majority, we know what comes next; for we have seen it frequently in the South American republics, and have experienced it once ourselves.

ROSSITER JOHNSON.